

# Rhode Island Department of Health

## Health Policy Briefs

### **Lowering the legal blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limit for drivers to .08 will save lives!**

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#### **Preventing injuries...is no accident!**

#### **Lowering the legal blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limit for drivers to .08 reduces alcohol-related traffic crashes.**

Experience has shown that lowering the legal BAC limit for drivers to .08 reduces alcohol-related traffic crashes and the fatalities and injuries that result from them. States that have lowered the legal BAC limit for drivers to .08 have experienced a 16% decline in the proportion of fatal crashes involving fatally injured drivers whose blood alcohol levels were .08 or higher.

Setting the BAC limit for drivers at .08 serves to deter impaired driving. Crash statistics show that even heavy drinkers, who account for a large percentage of drunk driving arrests, are less likely to drink and drive because of the general deterrent effect of a .08 BAC limit.

At the same time, lowering the BAC limit for drivers to .08 will make it possible to convict seriously impaired drivers whose blood alcohol concentrations are now considered marginal because they are at or just over .10 BAC.

#### **Virtually all drivers are substantially impaired at .08 BAC.**

Although outward appearances vary, research shows that the majority of drivers, even experienced drinkers, are substantially impaired at .08 BAC for performing critical driving tasks. There are significant impairments in braking, steering, lane changing, judgment and divided attention at .08 BAC. Studies show that performance decrements in some of these tasks are as high as 70% at .08 BAC. The impairments in reaction time, attention, tracking, comprehension, and other skills essential to safe driving increases the probability of a crash. This probability rises significantly after .05 BAC and the increase is substantial by .08 BAC. There is a gradual increase in risk for being in a crash at each BAC level, but after a driver reaches or exceeds .08 BAC the rise is very rapid.

Even when attempting to drive carefully, an impaired driver cannot compensate for these reduced abilities, and alcohol also affects the individual's ability to judge whether or not he or she is impaired.

**Lowering the legal BAC limit for drivers to .08 does not hurt the hospitality industry.**

While there is no "safe" amount of alcohol for drivers, most people can drink moderately and drive legally when the illegal limit is set at .08 BAC. A .08 BAC is not typically reached with a couple of beers after work or a glass or two of wine with dinner.

The average 170-pound male typically would have to consume four 12 oz. cans of beer within one hour on an empty stomach to reach a .08 BAC. The average 137-pound female typically would have to consume three 12 oz. cans of beer within one hour on an empty stomach to reach that level.

Drinks in body* needed to reach a 0.08 BAC								
	Weight in Pounds							
Gender	100	120	140	160	180	200	220	240
Female	2	3	3	4	4	4	5	5
Male	3	3	4	4	5	5	5	6

\* Defined as drinks consumed in one hour on an empty stomach.

A drink is defined as 1.5 ounces of 80 proof liquor or 12 ounces of beer or 5 ounces of table wine.

There is no evidence that per capita alcohol consumption is affected in states with a .08 BAC limit for drivers. Surveys show that most people would not drive after consuming two or three drinks in an hour and believe the limit should be no higher than that. Based on recent polls, two out of every three Americans favor lowering the limit to .08 BAC when they are aware of how much alcohol it takes to reach that level.

**The Rhode Island Unintentional Injury Prevention Program:**

Injuries are the leading cause of death and disability for those 1 - 44 years of age. Injury is a disease, and like other diseases, it can be studied, its causes understood and its occurrence predicted. The role of the Unintentional Injury Prevention Program in the Rhode Island Department of Health is to:

- Educate those at risk that most injuries, regardless of cause are preventable,
- Provide information and assistance to the public about injury causes and appropriate interventions to correct hazardous conditions,
- Promote measures which help protect the public from being injured,
- Alter high risk behaviors and conditions,
- Reduce the rate of unintentional injuries in Rhode Island.

### **Useful References:**

- 1) Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 1005 N. Glebe Road, Arlington, VA 22201
- 2) National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Unintentional Injury Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Mailstop K60, 4770 Buford Highway NE, Atlanta, GA 30341-3724
- 3) National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Traffic Safety Programs, U.S. Department of Transportation, NTS-11, 400 Seventh Street SW, Washington, DC 20590
- 4) National Safety Council, 1121 Spring Lake Drive, Itasca, IL 60143-3201

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